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Ge Chen
Sichuan Normal University & Palacky University

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Influential Factors of Deaf Identity Development

Ge Chen*

Abstract:

The development of deaf identity is a complicated and difficult process, and it was studied by many researchers from last century. They found that the development of deaf identity was affected by a lot of different factors and then they proved these influential factors by the qualitative or quantitative research methods in their articles or books, such as, the status of hearing loss, the educational experience, the environment of family, the mode of communication and so on. In present article, such influential factors will be summarized based on analyzing the theory of deaf identity development, and how these factors influence the development of deaf identity will be analyzed in the view of deafness as culture.

Key words:

Deaf Identity Development, Influential Factors, Educational experience, Family environment, Communicational methods, Hearing loss status

Introduction

There are two main perspectives of deaf people: physiological and socio-cultural. On the one hand, the physiological view is the most traditional view in mainstream society and is marked by viewing deafness as a disability, and the people who hold this view consider that a deaf child isn't a normal person; he or she must learn to speak, hear, and interact with general society. On the other hand, the socio-cultural view considers deaf people as part of a cultural, linguistic and ethnic minority (van Cleve & Crouch, 1989; Parasnis, 1997; Parks, 2009).

In the 1980s, the Deaf cultural movement gained increasing momentum; the rights and dignity of deaf persons have been increasing. There has been a small revolutionary shift in deaf education away from the medical (physiological) model of deaf people as disabled to the socio-cultural model of deaf people as a minority group with its own language and culture (Parasnis, 1997). Under this backdrop, the concept of deaf culture and community was introduced most strongly into the academic sphere and more and more researchers grew interest in deaf culture, deaf identity, the theory of deaf identity development and related concepts.

The concept of a deaf culture has proved of the utmost importance in wresting social power from an overwhelming hearing majority who have not only systemically privileged spoken language over visual language but who have also forced this spoken language on deaf people, both unsuccessfully and at the expense of a natural language equally capable of expressing abstract thought (Fraser, 2007). And the development

* Ge Chen, Faculty of Education Science, Sichuan Normal University; Institute of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Palacky University.

of deaf identity is a kind of the manifestations of theory of cultural and ethnical identity. The studies on deaf identity development are rich and complex, Glickman (1993, 1996) and subsequent researchers did many studies on this field, and they concluded the theory of deaf identity, the stages of deaf identity development, the influential factors of deaf identity development and so on.

In present article, such influential factors will be summarized based on analyzing the theory of deaf identity development, and how these factors impact the development of deaf identity in the view of deafness as a kind of ethnic culture will be analyzed.

The theory of deaf identity development

Identity is a complex concept, Baumeister (1997) did a classical description of identity is “representation of the self”, many scholars (Hadjikakou & Nikolaraze, 2006; McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011) thought that the development of self is closely connected with each person’s present and past experiences, also including the children’s family and school experience and interactions between oneself and the surrounding social environment.

To deaf persons, deaf identity is also a very crucial concept, this concept emphasizes the deaf community with characteristic ways that are separate from the hearing community and have given rise to a separate cultural and linguistic identity of deaf persons (McIlroy, 2008). According to this notion, the communicate methods, the educational experience and so on will influence the development of deaf identity. This issue was proved by Glickman (1993), Bat-Chava (2000) and other researchers; meanwhile, they pointed the diversity and development of deaf identity in their studies.

Deaf identity: Diversity

Glickman (1993) was the first researcher who interested in the development of a deaf identity. He set out “to formulate and test a model for the development of culturally deaf identities” and “to construct an instrument, the Deaf Identity Development Scale, to measure cultural identity in deaf people”. And then he identified four developmental stages of deaf identity based on these earlier studies: the “*culturally hearing*” which refers to people who hold the dominant culture’s attitudes and beliefs about hearing loss; the “*culturally marginal*” which refers to people who have shifting loyalties and confusion regarding their relationship to the deaf and hearing worlds; the “*immersion identity*” which refers to the “radical or militant” deaf stance; and the “*bicultural identity*” which refers to individuals who have integrated their deaf pride in a balanced way into their full humanity. Needs to be emphasized that his study reminded us, we should recognize firstly: deaf people and hearing people only have the “cultural difference”, and we must understand deaf culture as a kind of ethnic culture, and which is equal to the other culture of the minority.

Building on Glickman’s theory of deaf identity development, other subsequent researchers showed their own findings, such as Holcomb (1997) devised seven

identity categories a deaf person may fall into based on extent of exposure to the deaf community: the *balanced bicultural* identity applies to the deaf person who feels equally comfortable in both deaf and hearing cultures, the *deaf-dominant bicultural* identity refers to the people who is primarily involved in the deaf community but can relate well to hearing persons, the *hearing-dominant bicultural* identity refers to the people who has limited involvement in the deaf community but who can interact comfortably with deaf people, the *culturally isolated* identity refers to the people who rejects all involvement with other deaf people, the *culturally separate* identity applies to the people who prefers to interact with other deaf people as much as possible and keeps contacts with hearing people to a minimum, the *culturally marginal* identity applies to the people who is truly comfortable neither in the deaf community nor among hearing people, and *the culturally captive* identity applies to the deaf person who has had no opportunity to meet other deaf people and learn about deaf culture. And in his article, the case study proved these seven stages of deaf identity development.

Through the use of cluster analysis, Bat-Chava (2000) posited that the existence of three identities associated with these strategies, social change and individual mobility, of which the members of minority groups achieve positive social identity, was discerned in a sample of 267 deaf adults: culturally hearing identity, culturally deaf identity and bicultural identity.

In addition, Hole (2004) summarized the Melick's theory of deaf identity development in her doctoral dissertation. According to Melick, a deaf individual identifies first as "being an outsider". During this stage the deaf person tries to "pass as a hearing person to the best of his/her ability". The next stage, encountering/connecting, is initiated when the individual is exposed to the deaf community. In the middle phase, transitioning, the person starts to move into the deaf world. Finally, in the fourth phase, self-definition, "the person refuses to let others make him/her feel like an outsider. The person starts to define for himself/herself who she/he is and where she/he fits in the world".

Deaf identity development

Although Glickman, Holcomb and Melick devised the different deaf identity classification, there is an ongoing flux in terms of how deaf people define themselves as individuals and members of their cultures (.Maxwell-McCaw, Leigh & Marcus, 2000). They have the similar idea about the stage of the deaf identity development as follow.

Because most deaf people are born to hearing parents, who communicate and educate their children in speaking language all the time. There are too much negation about the deaf, the sign language and the style of deaf in the individual's growth environment. Then the deaf person will conform to the around environment, and identify the hearing culture. But with improving the self-awareness of deaf person, especially after the individual meet the other deaf person, they will feel that they can't enter both hearing social and deaf communicate and their identity will be dissonant. With the more contact with the deaf crowd, the more affirmative themselves; they

immerse themselves in deaf culture. The deaf will introspect themselves after change the identity, and then they will understand and aware of the difference between deaf culture and the hearing culture.

That means, a majority of deaf people identify themselves in the stage of the hearing identity, the negative identity, the deaf identity and the bicultural identity.

Several influential factors of deaf identity development

Almost all of the researchers who interested in the development of deaf identity believe that there are many different factors impact strongly the development of deaf identity.

Original, in the study of Glickman (1993), he found several factors might influence the development of deaf identity, such as the parents who use sign language, age of onset of hearing loss, preference to communicate in ASL, and educational experiences of deaf children. Since the publication of that research, subsequent researchers have undertaken similar studies using the DIDS¹ or exploratory qualitative study. They have analyzed the influential factors of deaf identity development and how such factors associated with deafness influenced cultural identification.

In this article, based on Glickman's study, such influential factors of deaf identity development, including the environment of family, educational experience, the status of hearing loss, and the mode of communication, will be summarized and analyzed.

The environment of family

To everyone, family is the most important living environment, however, Hamers (1996) summarized the literature somewhat differently, stating that "92-97% of deaf children are born into normally hearing families", these hearing parents never thought much about deafness, and even never thought they will have a deaf child. In such family environment, the attitude of hearing parents towards their deaf child, and the language which they used in the family etc. influence the development of their deaf child.

The studies of a majority of researchers (Bat-Chava, 2000; Leigh etc., 1998; Kossewska, 2008; Mitchell etc., 2004; Chen, 2011) proved this issue, and they thought that the environment of family is the crucial factor will affect the development of deaf identity. The environment of family as an influential factor of deaf identity development, including the attitude of hearing parents towards their deaf child, the view of such parents to deafness, the communication mode used in the home, parental hearing status and so on.

The language environment was provided by the parents whom had deaf/hard of hearing child affected the deaf children's identities. The finding of Bat-Chava (2000) provided the evidence, he pointed that "the deaf children whose parents are hearing or who grew up in homes where spoken language was the primary mode of

¹ DIDS: Deaf Identity Development Scale, compiled by Gilckman in 1993.

communication will be likely to adopt the view of deafness as a disability, and develop a culturally hearing identity”. Meanwhile, he also emphasized “those who grew up with deaf parents or in homes where sign language was used will be likely to regard deafness as a culture, and will identify themselves as culturally deaf”.

Leigh etc. (1998) modified the Deaf Identity Development Scale to include hearing individuals and examine how hearing and deaf adults identify themselves, they found that the experience of being deaf/hard of hearing with hearing parents influences one’s identity development in a way that is significantly different from the identity development for a hearing or deaf/hard of hearing person of deaf parents.

The case study of Hadjikakou (2011) on the deaf identity construction also supported this view. In her study, a deaf person named “John” who had developed a deaf identity as the participant in his study. But when John was young, he had had a hearing or marginal identity, because he has a deaf oral father and a hearing mother, both of them didn’t sign, they send John into a general primary school, John did not have any contacts with deaf people and would communicate exclusively orally with them, he did not feel comfortable with his deafness.

Meanwhile, other researchers discussed this influential factors in the view of such parents’ attitudes, just like Kossewska’s study in 2008 or Potmesilova’s study in 2013, she pointed that the attitudes of the parents are critical; parents who approach deaf children’s issues related to their hearing loss in a positive way will then impact their children’s identity positively.

In addition, Mitchell etc. (2004) have established that “there are large and systematic differences between the signing experiences of American deaf and hard of hearing students whose parents are deaf or hard of hearing too”, and these differences will affect the development of deaf/hare of hearing students’ identities. Rachelle In Deanne Hole’s doctoral dissertation (2004), she motioned another researcher named Rose found that family experiences were persuasive factors in her participants’ identity formation.

Some other researchers found that a few parents kept their deaf children stay in the family, they thought it was not necessary to send their deaf children to go to school because the children were disabled persons, they needn’t accept the education (Chen, 2011). The behaviours of these parents affect seriously the development of deaf children.

Overall, deaf children are affected strongly by the environment of their families to identify themselves. Because a lot of hearing parents’ initial views of deafness as a disability and even much deaf parents may adhere to this view, if they persist in their views, they will construct a family’s atmosphere of deafness as a disability, then sign language is forbidden in the family, the view of these parents is transmitted to their deaf children. These deaf children will farther away from deaf culture. In contrast, deaf children whose parents or siblings are members of the deaf community are more likely to be exposed to the cultural model of deafness through interaction with family and the deaf community.

Educational experience

Another crucial factor in the development of deaf identity is educational experience. Same to Glickman, majority researchers who were interested in this field held the same idea that as one of influential factors of deaf identity development, the educational experiences include the form of school which the deaf persons attend, the mode of communication in the school, the teacher's and schoolmates' view of deafness, the acceptance of peers and so on (Bat-Chava, 2000; Rose, 2001; Zhang & Wang, 2009; Hu., 2005; Nikolaraze & Hadjikakou, 2006, 2007). The diversity aspects of educational experience are interrelated, the form of educational setting, hearing school or deaf/special school, decided the mode of communication in the school, the attitude of teachers and schoolmate to deaf children whom integrated it. So almost every researcher who was interested in this field did the related studies based on discussing the form of schools.

For example, Bat-Chava (2000) discerned a sample of 267 deaf adults through the use of cluster analysis and interviewed deeply a subset of 56 people, and then he affirmed "people with culturally deaf identities attended schools with a stronger deafness orientation than the schools attended by those people with hearing and bicultural identities" and "people who attended deaf schools were easily integrated into the deaf community upon graduation. In contrast, fully mainstreamed deaf students did not know other deaf students or adults, and did not become part of the deaf community in adulthood."

In Rose's study (2001), she found that educational experiences were important in how the participants perceived identity. For instance, attendance at a residential school was a strong self-identification as culturally deaf.

Chinese scholars Zhang & Wang (2009) considered that the deaf children who accepted oral education in the school, they are easy to identify hearing culture or shaped "marginal identity", and to the contrary, the deaf children who accepted sign language, they are easy to identity deaf culturally identity or bicultural identity.

Though factor analysis, another Chinese young researcher Hu (2005) concluded that deaf students who ever studied in normal school, regardless of the length of time, are further away from the hearing culture than those deaf students who studied only in deaf/special school. Meanwhile, the students who only studied in deaf/special school are easier identify deaf culture than those deaf students who entered regular schools.

In Nikolaraze & Hadjikakou (2006) study, the educational experiences of 25 deaf adults are explored in relation to their identity, and the qualitative analysis indicated that the most critical educational experiences for the participants' identity concerned their interactions with hearing or deaf peers and their language of communication with their peers at school. And in their other study (2007), they indicated that "the type of school, and the academic and social experiences shared within the school between the participants and their classmates and teachers, played a crucial role in these deaf individuals' identity development".

There is an entirely different idea in all studies, Overstreet (1999) found that educational experiences did not seem to be influential in the development of her deaf participants' identity based on semi-structured interviews. Such finding is rare few in

all of the studies about educational setting as one of the influential factors of deaf identity development.

In general, deaf persons place in different educational environments that can affect the formation and development of their identities. The basic reason is that they can gain the different view of deafness in different schools. On one hand, deaf children who study in deaf schools or special schools, they are easy to own the view that the deafness is an ethnic culture because of the influences of schoolmates and the mode of communication, for example, even in schools that used oral communication in the classroom, sign language was used outside of classes with peers and sometimes with school personnel (Janesick & Moores, 1992). That means they have more opportunity to contact with other deaf persons, to obtain the more positive view of deafness, and then enter successfully the deaf community upon graduation. But on the other hand, to those deaf children who study in normal schools, namely hearing schools, they are easy to hold the view that the deafness is a disability because of the same reasons. Such different view of deafness will affect the development of deaf children's identities.

The perspective that deaf people should be regarded primarily as a cultural and language minority group rather than as individuals with an aetiological disability is gathering support among educators, linguists (Parasnis, 1997) and it can provide a good learning environment to deaf students.

The mode of communication

Although the mode of deaf communication had been discussed in the studies of family environment and educational experience, many scholars (Sutton-Spence, 2010; Nikolaraze & Hadjikakou, 2006; Kossewska, 2008; Sheridan, 2010) still did a lot of researches on the mode of communication as an unattached influential factor of deaf identity development. To every deaf person, the mode of communication mainly includes sign language and oral language, so the use of the language, the attitude of deaf person to the different language will impact them to construct their identities.

In Deanne Hole's doctoral dissertation (2004), she mentioned a study of Moschella (1993) and summarized his findings, explicitly embarked on the exploration of how an individual's childhood experiences of either sign language or oral rearing were related to identity development. Using a qualitative method, she found that the deaf and hard of hearing participants' experiences of communication philosophies (sign or oral) influenced their identity formation. Those participants who experienced an oral-only approach during their development were more prone to feelings of "shame, isolation, alienation, constraint, and depression" than were the participants who were raised with sign language. Moschella's findings emphasize the importance of communication methods and their potential relationship to identity formation with deaf individual.

The role of sign language on the deaf identity development was discussed by many researchers. Sutton-Spence (2010) described the role of sign language narratives in the development of deaf identity in children. By analyzing interviews with British deaf teachers and other deaf adults as well as stories told to children

using British Sign Language, he found that aspects of deaf culture and sign language the adult signers value and wish to pass on to the next generation of deaf signers. These include pride in deafness, the value of signing, and the importance of the deaf community.

Meanwhile, Nikolaraze & Hadjikakou (2006) did a study about the role of educational experiences in the development of deaf identity. They also found “the participants with a deaf identity feel that GSL is their language, and as such, it allows them effective communication”.

On the other hands, some other researchers did this study from another point of view, which are the influences of the dominant communicate mode/speaking language. Sheridan (2010) collected the stories of deaf children by qualitative approaches, such as drawing by deaf children, interview and so on, and he found that how a person communicates is an important factor in their sense of belonging and their acceptance of others as similar to or different from themselves based on these stories. And he gave an example about deaf child “Danny”, his mother was hard of hearing and his father and one sibling were both hearing, but all of them signed, Danny communicated in ASL, when Danny drew a picture of a deaf boy at his residential school, the comfort he felt in this environment was apparent.

Kossewska (2008) pointed that “the dominant mode of communication is related to linguistic competence. The linguistic competence of deaf students understood as a part of their process of socialisation and the formation of their self-concept is also an important predictor of self-identity.”

Besides above statement, Potmesil and Valenta (2006) mentioned a concept “Total Communication” that “can best be defined as the most liberal, eclectic, borrowing techniques form a variety of different methods” and they thought that “for teaching can be used as a combination of signs, writing, mime, speech, pictures or any other communication method that works.” This approach should be more benefit than using only one type of communication mode for the development of deaf children.

We can conclude based on above summarized research findings that there is great potential within the mode of communication and the development of deaf identity. Firstly, the majority of deaf children are born to hearing parent and therefore do not have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with sign language and deaf culture within their family, unless they attend a school for the deaf, or participate the deaf community, where they learn sign language as well as the norms of the deaf culture by interacting with their deaf peers. Sign language, just like a bridge, brings deaf persons enter deaf culture. Secondly, many deaf people identify themselves as people who see the world visually and use sign language. Deafness is not a loss but a social, cultural, and linguistic identity.

Thus, we can say that there is great potential not only within the mode of communication and the development of deaf identity but also within the means of communication and cultural heritage.

The status of hearing loss

At last, the status of hearing loss is also an important influential factor of deaf

identity development. Related researchers (Fischer & McWhirter, 2001; Hu, 2005) consider that the status of hearing loss, including the onset of hearing loss and the degree of hearing loss, affect deaf persons' identities construction.

Fischer and McWhirter (2001) revised the DIDS and collected evidence of reliability and validity for the revised version. They investigated the relationship between a participant's onset and degree of hearing loss and his or her deaf cultural identity. The finding shows that "prelingually deaf individuals are more culturally deaf", and "higher scores on the Hearing Scale for hard-of-hearing people suggest that they are more culturally hearing than are people who are prelingually deaf and postlingually deaf". Overall, they concluded "the onset and severity of hearing loss do seem to be related to one's deaf identity development".

Hu (2005) compiled questionnaire of deaf identity development by herself, through factor analysis, she considered that hard-of-hearing person is easier to identify hearing culture than deaf person, postlingually deaf are more culturally marginal than prelingually deaf.

According to above statement, the mode of communication can affect the development of deaf identity, Parks (2009) pointed that the degree of hearing loss and parents' hearing status (Thumann-Prezioso, 2005) are factors influence communication choice. Based on their studies, the degree of hearing loss can impact indirectly deaf identity development.

The status of hearing loss is the only physical one in all influential factors that were summarized in present article, both the onset of hearing loss and the degree of hearing loss emphasis the physical status rather than the social or cultural environment. Although certain deaf person loses his/her hearing might be related with social or cultural surrounding, for example, certain deaf people lose hearing because of war or earthquake, in general, such influential factor more emphasis the physical or medical reason. Compared with the other three influential factors, namely the environment of family, the educational experience and the mode of communication, this factor more emphasize that the influence or damnification of hearing loss to the behaviour or psychology of deaf people.

Conclusion

All in all, the environment of family, educational experience, the mode of communication and the status of hearing loss will influence strongly the development of deaf identity. Firstly, all of these factors affect and contain each other, they are not independent absolutely. For example, the mode of communication is one of the important aspects in the environment of family and educational experience, it also affect the atmosphere of family and school.

Secondly, besides the status of hearing loss, the other three influential factors have a common ground in affecting deaf identity development, which is it is more favourable if they have the view of deafness as a socio-culture. This common ground influence deaf persons to construct more healthy identity, such as deaf identity or

bicultural identity, if people who around deaf persons and deaf themselves have the view of deafness as a socio-culture.

The studies of many researchers (eg, Hu, 2005; Kossewska, 2008; Bat-Chava, 2000 and others) provided the reasons and evidences of above view. They implied that teachers or students in educational setting, parents or children in family, if they hold on the view of deafness as part of cultural and lingual minority, the deaf person who stays in such environment is easier to identify himself/herself positive because of favourable language circumstance and higher acceptance of others. In contrary, if they view that deafness as disability, the deaf who lives in this atmosphere would construct negative identity.

So, it is necessary to improve the cognition, understanding and respect of public to deafness, we hope that they can change gradually their views of deafness from disability to socio-cultural perception. Meanwhile, deaf people should have a positive attitude to their own surrounding, understand their own culture, and enter actively their community.

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Contact:

Ge Chen,
Faculty of Education Science, Sichuan Normal University
NO. 5, Jing An Road, Jin Jiang District
Chengdu city 610068, Sichuan province, P.R. China

Doctoral student,
Institute of Special Education, Faculty of Education,
Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic.

E-mail: gechen80@163.com